

Gov't secrecy impedes understanding of climate change

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Our northeastern climate has been frigid and snowy this winter, while the west coast has seen record high temperatures and drought. Across the Atlantic, Britain has experienced exceptional rainfall and devastating floods, while the weather in southeastern Europe shattered 100-year records for warm temperatures in January. It is all part of a climate shift towards more stationary jet-stream patterns that are giving extremes on a global scale. But we rarely see this global picture because the news media focus just on what is happening locally.

I have been reflecting on why some nations keep critical climate records secret by not allowing free access to data on the Internet. The United States is an exception, as we insist that data that is collected using government funds be freely available. However, this is not the case in many other countries.

Canada, for example, has a tradition of protecting its data — one that scientists find very frustrating because the Canadian data is generally of excellent quality going back for decades. We need this data because the climate system does not recognize national borders.

My current research is based on superb data from the Canadian prairies. But when I give talks on the fascinating discoveries I have made using measurements that I did not know existed 15 months ago, puzzled students ask me: “Why would anyone keep such important data secret?”

I can't give a simple answer because it is part of a deeper syndrome, one of those conflicts between science and government. Governments are concerned with power, and they think open access to information weakens their authority. This attitude is partly self-centered nationalism, but secrecy also makes it easier for the political elite to deceive and manipulate the public.

Secrecy clashes with the values of science, which depends on open access, honest analysis and the free exchange of information. Consequently we see a struggle for the control of the “truth” in public forums, especially where the reality of climate change clashes with political and economic ideologies — not to mention the fact that fossil fuel reserves are worth a staggering \$30 trillion to the present economic system.

National political systems thrive on controlling information and managing national myths, a situation that presents a special challenge in today's global world because the myths of other nations differ from ours. At the same time, governments rarely tell the truth in public. This means that spying, like the NSA's global network, is useful, because it can give our government an edge. But spying must also be kept secret, because it doesn't resonate well with the democratic myths of a free country, free enterprise, free markets and so on.

Sadly this power framework based on secrecy, manipulation and control is useless for managing global climate change, which is slipping out of control. We need global collaboration to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not governments that traditionally have seen other countries as threats to national self-interest.

Of course, deception is endemic in society. Last fall I traveled to Texas, where I was to give a talk about the Canadian prairie data at Texas A&M University. On the flight I was explaining with excitement my discoveries to a woman who worked for the oil industry. She was curious about climate change, but her final question stunned me: “How do you know the Canadians didn't make it all up?”

She was serious, and as a literal person I tried for a moment to imagine how a thousand Canadian observers could conspire over 60 years and a thousand miles of prairie to create such a magnificent data set that answered so many of our climate puzzles — but I failed.

For research scientists, open access to data is now a matter of scientific ethics, because science depends on careful, accurate analysis and the free sharing of results and the data behind them. When I finish my current analyses I must post this data, so that others can review what I have found.